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## **Religion and the Angel's Wake Tradition in Violeta Parra's Art and Lyrics**

Religión y tradición del *Velorio del angelito* en el arte y la lírica de Violeta Parra

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This article explores Violeta Parra's employment of religious archetypes in her music and visual art. It considers the disparate ways in which Parra employs religious tropes in her arpilleras [embroideries] and paintings. In some cases Parra's employment of religion is satirical and sacrilegious, while in other cases her religious representations are serious and profound. In all cases, the same themes are re-iterated in Parra's music and in her visual art.

**Keywords:** Religion, Violeta Parra, music.

Este artículo indaga acerca de cómo Violeta Parra hace uso de arquetipos religiosos en su música y arte visual. Considera las distintas maneras en que Parra hace uso de tropos religiosos en sus arpilleras y cuadros. En algunos casos la manera en que Parra hace uso de la religión adquiere un tono satírico y de sacrilegio, mientras en otros casos sus representaciones religiosas son serias y profundas. En todos los casos, los mismos temas se re-iteran en la música de "Parra y su arte visual".

**Palabras clave:** Religión, Violeta Parra, música.

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This article explores Violeta Parra's employment of religious archetypes in her music and visual art. It considers the disparate ways in which Parra employs religious tropes in her *arpilleras* [embroideries] and paintings. In some cases Parra's employment of religion is satirical and sacreligious, while in other cases her religious representations are serious and profound. In all cases, the same themes are re-iterated in Parra's music and in her visual art. Much of the focus in this article is on Parra's representation of the Angel's Wake tradition. By presenting this ritual and other popular practices that are not considered as art, Parra destabilised implicit hegemonies in the field of cultural production. At the heart of her work is a drive to vindicate Chilean traditional art forms, such as popular poetry, which was itself based on a stock of religious narratives. Her use of religious tropes thus offers a pliable view of religion, which places value on folk culture. Although Parra's works can be seen as religious, ultimately the religious narratives are drawn from popular representations and thus it is folk culture that provides Parra with the visual syntax for her art and the themes for some of her song lyrics.

*Porque los pobres no tienen* [For the poor do not have]

*Porque los pobres no tienen  
adónde volver la vista  
la vuelven hacia los cielos  
con la esperanza infinita  
de encontrar lo que su hermano  
en este mundo le quitan, palomitay,  
qué cosas tiene la vida, ay zambitay.*

*Porque los pobres no tienen  
adónde volver la voz,  
la vuelven hacia los cielos  
buscando una confesión  
ya que su hermano no escucha  
la voz de su corazón, palomitay,  
qué cosas tiene la vida, zambitay.<sup>1</sup>*

[For the poor do not have  
Anywhere to turn their gaze  
They turn towards the sky  
With infinite hope  
Of finding what their brother  
Has stolen from them in this world, little dove!  
Such is life, ay zambita!<sup>2</sup>

Because the poor do not have  
Anywhere to turn their voice  
They turn towards the sky  
Seeking a confession

<sup>1</sup> Parra, Violeta. 2005. *Cancionero Violeta Parra* (Santiago: Impresos Socías Ltda), pp. 95.

<sup>2</sup> The Zamba is an Argentine dance. Zambita is a diminutive of it.

Since their brother doesn't listen□  
 To the voice of his heart, little dove□□  
 Such is life,□ay zambita!□ □

The lyrics above, taken from Violeta Parra's song *Porque los pobres no tienen* [For the Poor Do not Have] cast the christian hope for salvation as a means of escape from the injustice of human society. This presentation of heaven as a way of appeasing the deprived people in society can be read as a scathing indictment of the church. However Parra also wrote lyrics, which can be seen as profoundly religious. In this chapter I will consider Parra's representation of religion. My analysis will weave between Parra's visual and verbal works to unravel the threads which link them.<sup>3</sup>

Violeta Parra started her career as a musician but she also produced poetry and outstanding visual art. Although she focused on visual art late in life, she worked in a number of mediums from embroidery and wire sculpture to mural paintings and papier-mache sculptures. Parra's work in the plastic arts was prolific. I will begin by exploring the way the religious themes that Parra expresses in her song lyrics and décimas find pictorial form in her art. I will then analyse Parra's representations of ritual, specifically her paintings of the tradition known as the *velorio del angelito* [the angel's wake].

Much has been written on Parra's interest in traditional culture. Marjorie Agosin and Inés Dölz-Blackburn have written about the way popular poetics informed Parra's décimas<sup>4</sup> and authors like Patricio Manns have explored these links with respect to Parra's music.<sup>5</sup> I propose that Parra's art in all forms is built upon the iconography of chilean popular culture and at the heart of this culture is religion. Parra's religious songs are interesting, since they often contain an underlying criticism of christianity. For example, Parra describes hell as a mechanism for frightening the poor, and of processions and rituals as a way for them to console themselves though the hope for a glorious afterlife:

*De tiempos inmemoriales  
 que se ha inventado el infierno  
 para asustar a los pobres  
 con sus castigos eternos,  
 y el pobre que es inocente  
 con su inocencia creyendo, palomitay,  
 qué cosas tiene la viday, zambitay.*

<sup>3</sup> The works of art by Violeta Parra that are mentioned in this article can be viewed in the catalogue of her art which was released by the Fundación Violeta Parra: Parra, Violeta. 2007. Cecilia García Huidobro, Angel Parra, Isabel Parra and Milena Rojas Cereceda editors. *Violeta Parra: obra visual* (Santiago: Corporación Patrimonio Cultural de Chile). They can also be viewed on the website <http://museovioletaparra.cl/> [last accessed 7 October 2016].

<sup>4</sup> Agosin, Marjorie and Inés Dölz-Blackburn. 1992. *Violeta Parra o la expresión inefable: un análisis crítico de su poesía, prosa y pintura*. Santiago: Planeta.

<sup>5</sup> Manns, Patricio. 1977. *Violeta Parra la guitare indocile: anthologie des chansons de Violeta Parra* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf).



[...]

Porque los pobres no tienen  
en este mundo esperanza,  
se amparan en la otra vida  
como a una justa balanza,  
por eso las procesiones,  
las velas, las alabanzas, palomitay:  
¡qué cosas tiene la vida, zambitay!<sup>6</sup>

[From time immemorial  
Hell has been invented  
To frighten the poor  
With its eternal punishments  
And the poor,  
who are innocent  
Believing,  
in their innocence

[...]

And as the poor do not have  
Hope in this world  
They shelter themselves in the other life  
In the belief of a fair balance  
Hence the procesions  
The candles and the prayers  
In their innocence believing, little dove  
Such is life, zambitay]

What emerges from these lyrics is the sense that the church is an instrument of suppression that discourages the disadvantaged from questioning their position of hardship and inequality. God, Parra writes, does not want revolutions:

*El cielo tiene las riendas  
la tierra y el capital,  
y a los soldados del Papa  
les llena bien el morral,  
y al que trabaja le meten  
la gloria como un bozal. Palomitay  
¡qué cosas tiene la vida, zambitay!*

*Para seguir la mentira,  
lo llama su confesor;  
le dice que Dios no quiere  
ninguna revolución,  
ni pliegos ni sindicatos,*

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<sup>6</sup> Parra, Violeta. 1978. *Violeta Parra*. Introduced by Patricio Manns (Madrid: Ediciones Júcar), pp. 148.

*que ofende su corazón, palomitay:  
¡qué cosas tiene la vida, zambitay!*<sup>7</sup>

[Heaven has the power,  
The land and the money  
And the soldiers of the Pope  
Stuff their bags full  
And on the worker they put  
salvation like a muzzle

To maintain the lie,  
his confessor (the priest) calls him over  
and says that God doesn't want  
Any revolutions  
Or strikes, or unions  
Which offend His heart]<sup>8</sup>

Many of Parra's art works, like her song lyrics, have a twist when it comes to the presentation of religion. None of the biblical scenes perpetuates the notion of a glorious afterlife; instead, the images are imbued with great pessimism. In the oil painting *Juicio final* (1964-1965) [Final Judgement], for example, a menacing figure looms over a swathe of faces that seem to cower from his wrath. Parra has presented a scene in which few seem to have been saved from the fires of Hell. Traditionally scenes of the Last Judgement represent 'the Second Coming of Christ, when, according to Christian doctrine, there will be a general resurrection of the dead who, with the living, will be finally judged and consigned to heaven or hell'.<sup>9</sup> This is related in the Bible by Matthew:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit in state on his throne, with all the nations gathered before him. He will separate men into two groups, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. [...] [The unrighteous will] go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous will enter eternal life.<sup>10</sup>

In Parra's painting of the Final Judgement, the body of the Son of Man takes a flaming red form which structures the image creating a barrier between the realms of heaven and earth. The face of the Son of Man has been created using thick brush strokes of purple and white paint, which blend into the red and purple sky behind him. The combination of these red and purple hues collocate with fire evoking the idea of a burning sky, a constant in scenes of

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148.

<sup>8</sup> The English translation of these stanzas is by David Anderson. Taken from the website <http://www.antiwarsongs.org/canzone.php?id=6754&lang=en> [last accessed 8.06.16]. Earlier translations of this song were my own.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, James. 1995. *Subjects and Symbols in Art*. (London: John Murray Publishers), pp. 186.

<sup>10</sup> Matt. 25:31-46.



Last Judgement<sup>11</sup>, which in turn, suggests a scene of intense anger. By focusing on the fury of God (which the spectator recognises from their familiarity with other archetypal versions of the Last Judgement), Parra's painting differs from traditional depictions of the scene. Her positioning of God's arm recalls that of the famous standing Christ in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* (1536-1541). Parra has focused on the way in which Christ's subjects, who are depicted along the bottom of the image, cower from his wrath. To the left the figures are painted in purple, black, blue and turquoise. At first glance it seems like the contrasting green and turquoise figures might differentiate the saved and the damned at the point of final judgement, however this seems unlikely as the figures are united by their expressions of terror. One character is in tears. Others are open-mouthed, in horror or shock. No one, it seems, has been saved in Parra's version of the Last Judgement. The overall tone and subject of this painting emphasise the idea that there is a sense of fear at the centre of the Christian faith just as the lyrics of *Porque los pobres no tienen* declare that hell was invented to frighten the poor: 'inventado el infierno para asustar a los pobres'.<sup>12</sup>

Parra's religious paintings do not all relate directly to her song lyrics. Indeed the visual syntax of the visual artworks express political meanings more subtly than the lyrics. This subtlety of the criticism implicit in the individual images is partly because Parra follows models from the ecclesiastic traditional, so at first glance the works of art resemble archetypal christian paintings. The painting *Juicio final* exemplifies this since both its structure and composition recall traditional Christian paintings of the Final Judgement. Typically, Christ tends to be larger than his subjects in such scenes, and is usually centred, with his subjects beneath him and divided into two groups. Parra would have encountered scenes of the Last Judgement in Chile as well as in France, where such images originated and these have certainly informed her own conception of the scene.

Despite being based on archetypes from christian art history, Parra's art works can be seen to emerge in a more secular manner. Rather than stem directly from religious belief, Parra's religious images are often founded in legends from Chilean collective memory, which, in turn, are transculturations that have absorbed ideas that were brought from Europe. While some of the images are critical of the church, the actual ideas that they present are more complex. *Juicio final* is an image which corresponds directly with one of Parra's songs. The song in question, 'Verso por el fin del mundo', [Verse for the end of the world] was one of Parra's first recordings. It was released as a single in 1955. A key aspect of 'Verso por el fin del mundo', however, is that it is informed by Chilean popular culture and therefore a hybrid of Parra's own artistry and Chilean folklore. On the one hand, her creations are unique but on the other hand they are absolutely representative of the essence of Chilean popular tradition. As Parra herself explained, popular singers were well versed in christian narratives: "Les chanteurs populaires"

<sup>11</sup> Loverance, Rowena. 2007. *Christian Art*. (London: The British Museum Press), pp. 220.

<sup>12</sup> Parra, Violeta. 1978. *Violeta Parra*. Introduced by Patricio Manns (Madrid: Ediciones Júcar), pp. 148.

[...] "vivent avec une Bible sous le bras" [The popular singers [...] lived with a bible under their arm]<sup>13</sup> Parables are often at the heart of oral narratives since traditionally the bible may have been the only book in the household and would often have been read aloud to a gathered family.

Parra's incorporation of biblical imagery takes the form of set images and narratives that stem from parables, which with time have been translated into popular forms. The tale of the final judgement is one such narrative. As Juan Uribe Echevería explains, there is a stock of images and invocations of the final judgement in Chilean popular culture:

*En el repertorio de los cantores populares chilenos de guitarra y guitarrón que desde tiempos inmemorables siguen cantando en los velorios de "angelitos" y en las novenas a la Virgen y a los santos, nunca falta el verso por el "Juicio Final" o "Acabo de mundo", tema muy socorrido en un país de terremotos y otras catástrofes de la naturaleza.*<sup>14</sup>

[In the repertoire of the popular chilean guitar and *guitarrón* singers, who have been singing at "angel's" wakes and in the novenas for the Virgen and the saints since time immemorial, there is always a verse for the Final Judgement and the End of the World, themes which are particularly helpful in a country of earthquakes and other natural disasters.]

These stock images take multiple forms in chilean visual, musical and literary culture. In her analysis of chilean theatrical production between 1973 and 1985 Boyle considers the way three characters in the play *Los payasos de la esperanza* by the Taller de Investigación Teatral reflect on the Catholic promises of salvation of the poor in the afterlife:

They home in on the promise of the poor being the inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, and in this scheme of things their human role is passive, they are acted upon by circumstances beyond their control and, they themselves are incapable of changing a predetermined course. In many senses this attitude is an indication of overall social underdevelopment, for it distances the blow of the economic hardships they suffer by shifting the emphasis away from worldly comforts to heavenly promises.<sup>15</sup>

Such reflections, in this case by three unemployed *payasos* [clowns], typify the religious element of popular discourse. The *payasos*, or clowns, were the

<sup>13</sup> Parra, Violeta. 1965 *Poesía popular de los andes* (Paris: François Maspero), pp. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Uribe Echevería, Juan. 1972. "El tema del juicio final en la poesía popular de Chile" *Boletín de filología* (XXII: 315-323): 315.

<sup>15</sup> Boyle, Catherine. 1992. *Chilean Theatre, 1973-1985: Marginality, Power, Selfhood*. London (Cranberry and Mississauga: Associated University Presses), 72.



harbingers of popular culture. Like the words of these cultural icons, Parra's art conveys a deep scepticism about the final judgement.

By basing her images on Chilean popular culture and then infusing them with modernist techniques, Parra creates a fascinating hybrid of pictorial expression. This hybrid essence is multifaceted; within any given work there are hybrids within popular culture (in the form of transculturations) and with popular culture (in the form of hybrids with western modernist aesthetics). In order to appreciate this it is useful to consider the notion of syncretism:

*El carácter híbrido que proviene en América Latina de fusiones y mestizajes y se acentúa en casi todas las sociedades contemporáneas por las complejas interrelaciones entre lo tradicional y lo moderno, lo popular y lo culto, lo subalterno y lo hegemónico. A esa mezcla y coparticipación de formas culturales provenientes de diversa índole que permanecen en convivencia, mejor, le llamaremos sincretismo. Este efecto abstracto pero real, determina la cultura en general y se define como la concentración de dos o más funciones de diferente procedencia, vigorosamente entremezcladas en una sola forma, produciendo en razón a su convivencia, un eminente resultado.<sup>16</sup>*

[The hybrid character of fusions and mixes is prevalent in Latin America and accentuated in almost all contemporary societies by the complex interrelation of the traditional and the modern, the popular and the erudite, the subalterna and the hegemonic. To this mix and coparticipation of cultural forms, that stem from diverse natures remaining together, would be better called syncretism. This abstract but real effect determines the culture in general and is defined as the concentration of two or more functions of different origin vigorously mixed in one form and producing an eminent result from the mix.]

Although Villalobos Herrera extends the concept to include other hybrids, syncretism tends to refer to religious fusions.

In Parra's oil painting *La cena* [The Supper] syncretism merges with surrealism. There is something quintessentially Latin American about *La cena*, probably as a result of the muted tones that Parra has employed and the simplicity of the image. This links with other popular depictions of religious scenes. The subject, however, is once again, taken from the European high art tradition: specifically from Christian art. The painting presents Christ's last meal with his apostles as described in Matthew 26:17-29, Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-23 and John 13:21-30. It is a scene that has been widely depicted in Christian art and usually focuses on the disciples' response to

<sup>16</sup> Villalobos Herrera, Álvaro. 2006. "El sincretismo y el arte contemporáneo latinoamericano". *Ra Ximhai* El Fuerte: Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México year 2 (2): 393-417, pp. 403

Christ's announcement that one of them will betray him. In this image, we find the apostles seated around two sides of a large black table. The twelve apostles sit to the rear of the table, allowing the spectator to see their faces and their meal. To the right of the table is a cockerel, a visual indicator of Christ's announcement at the last supper that one of the disciples would betray him before the cock crowed three times. In traditional Christian art the disciples are often painted with differing expressions and actions, emphasising their distinct responses to the news of the betrayal. In Parra's image, this has been reduced to different colours. We are unable to discern which disciple is which because Parra has not incorporated the iconography that traditionally identifies them. It is the position of Christ however, that makes this painting so atypical. He does not figure in his usual position alongside his disciples; instead he is presented *upon* the table in a pose which at once recalls a roast dinner and his own crucifixion. Essentially Parra's work takes the notion of the first communion, to its logical conclusion. She has presented the apostles as if they will literally eat the body of Christ. There is something disturbing in this conception of the holy sacrament and it makes *La cena* eminently surreal.

This surreality is what sets Parra's art apart from traditional religious art and at the same time it is what makes it so modern. Parra's embroidery *Cristo en bikini* (1964), for example, is equally surreal. It depicts Christ on the cross, but the sanctity of the image is undermined by the title, which suggests he is wearing a bikini. The bathos in the title provides a humorous twist on the crucifixion scene that recalls the art work L.H.O.O.Q. (1919) by Marcel Duchamp. In L.H.O.O.Q. Duchamp famously drew a moustache and beard onto a postcard of Leonardo Di Vinci's painting Mona Lisa. Part of the enduring humour of *Cristo en bikini* is in the clash between the words in the title. While the word Christ has sanctimonious connotations, the word bikini has more of an affinity with low-brow magazines or the tabloid press than the realm of high art. This rupture leads to the bathos in the title. The juxtaposition also emits two parallel yet opposing messages about art. On the one hand, it conveys the reverence one would expect from a religious image, yet on the other hand it seems to ridicule the authority of such an image through the use of a tongue in cheek title. The relationship between the subject matter, the medium and the style of the image is also parodical.

Without the title *Cristo en bikini* (1964) there are few clues to Parra's humour and the embroidery itself, despite its modernism, appears to convey the divinity one would expect from a religious painting. Parra has employed her stitching rather like a pencil with some details, such as Christ's ribs and the muscles of his legs created rather unusually by the technique of shading, using different colours of wool. As in Parra's other embroideries, there is a detail, which has been created separately and stitched to the surface of the embroidery: Christ's loincloth or bikini as Parra calls it in the title. We see Christ's full body upon the cross and the spectator is looking directly at him, which gives the work a sense of immediacy. The blue background cloth lends an air of serenity. Blue is traditionally employed in Christian art to present divinity; in paintings of the European Renaissance it was the colour of the robes of Christ, Mary and angels. These figures were often presented with a gold halo. Parra has reversed this colour coding to impressive effect in



*Cristo en bikini* (1964), using blue as the background cloth and yellowish gold to present Christ's body. Yellow is an unusual choice of colour for the dying Christ, but it is also the colour used by Parra's favourite artist Chagall in his 1941 painting *The Blue House* (1917) and his stained and leaded glass window *Peace* (1964). The power of these colours lies in the fact that they are a complementary pair; each primary colour is opposite a secondary on the colour wheel and the effect is striking. Graham Dixon explains the technique of combining colours in this way as one which has a kind of synesthetic effect: 'these pairs of colours are as different as can be in terms of tone or temperature and visually vibrate against each other. They make each other look brighter when they sit side by side.<sup>17</sup> The combination that Parra has chosen –yellow orange and mustard, colours against a sonorous blue– creates this resonant effect. These are sophisticated and accomplished visual poetics, which result in a modern painting which appears to be sacrosanct. The element that desecrates the sanctity of the image is, of course, the title. *Cristo en bikini* (1964) exemplifies Parra's unique interpretation of surrealism. The contrariety of the irreverent title and the holiness of the image recall the *non sequiturs* of the surrealists. Furthermore, the inherent absurdity in the title undoes the sanctimonious authority of traditional crucifixion scenes in a subtle but amusing manner, an act that, in turn, undermines the authority of high art. If we were to really search within the embroideries for details that are in keeping with the title, we could perhaps say that the subtle surrealism of the image is enhanced by the choice of pink as the colour for Christ's cross and the incorporation of the small bird holding a small olive branch, unusual details contrast with typical grotesque images of the crucifixion scene. Essentially, Parra manages to undo the authority of religious art without recourse to negativity. Indeed the image is mirthful. It is this playful parody that recalls the work of the surrealists for whom, 'taboo-breaking images, blasphemy were common'.<sup>18</sup>

Parra's work is complex and the nuances of meaning do not always conform to one coherent position. In her analysis of Spanish frontier ballads, Sizen Yiacoup points to the way they 'have been used to construct a variety of communal identities, some of which are not only disparate but fundamentally conflicting'.<sup>19</sup> The ballad, Yiacoup argues, is a mnemonic device which is 'less concerned with the verifiable portrayal of historical events and figures from the ideologically rigid perspective of the victors and far more focused on offering varied and "pliable" views of cultural encounter according to the ever-evolving historical contexts in which they were composed and published'.<sup>20</sup> Parra's work in both visual and verbal forms has much in common with traditional ballads. It is inspired by oral culture but also bold enough to freely twist and alter traditional culture.

<sup>17</sup> Graham-Dixon, Andrew. 2008. *Art: the Definitive Guide* (London: Dorling Kindersley), pp. 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 470

<sup>19</sup> Yiacoup, Sizen. 2009. "Remembering Cultural Difference in the Castilian Frontier Ballads". *Anglo-Spanish Society Quarterly Review*, Anglo-Spanish Society, London (Spring): 5-10 pp. 5

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6



Thus far I have looked at works which present a satirical, surrealist or critical version of religious archetypes. However Parra also created works which honoured religious traditions in a deeply moving way. Parra was particularly interested in the *a lo humano* [the human] and *a lo divino* [the divine] styles of traditional songs and much of her religious art echoes these songs. Parra describes the *a lo humano* songs that were sung at gatherings of popular singers. These singers, she explained, practically lived with a bible under their arm. Religion was one of their main inspirations.<sup>21</sup> There is a clear link between religion and popular culture. The bible was an inspiration for many traditional songs.

Parra's employment of tradition and her respect for religious ideas is particularly evident in the works she created about death. Parra lost one of her own children (her daughter Rosa Clara) while the child was in infancy and this, coupled with her broad interest in traditional rituals, must have deepened her fascination with the custom of the *velorio del angelito* [the angel's wake]. The angel's wake is a ceremony traditionally held following the death of an infant. In 1958, while she was employed as the director of folkloric studies at the Universidad de Concepción, Parra published an article in the academic journal *Pomaire* in which she explained the tradition of the angel's wake. The *velorio del angelito* was a Catholic tradition that died out in Spain at the end of the nineteenth century however it was still occurring in Chile when Parra carried out her fieldwork in the late 1950s.

*El velorio del angelitos (niños de corta edad) se hace de acuerdo con un complicado ceremonial. El niño es vestido con traje blanco, nuevo, que debe ser cosido con hilo sacado de una carretilla que nunca ha sido usada, cosido con agujas nuevas y cortado con tijeras nuevas. Se le colocan alas, por lo general de papel plateado y luego es sentado en un altar adornado con flores blancas. En los pueblos hay mujeres especializadas en estas faenas.*<sup>22</sup>

The angel's (young child's) wake, follows a complicated ceremony. The [deceased] child is dressed in new, white, clothes, which should even be sewn with thread from a reel that has never been used, sewn with new needles and the cloth cut with new scissors. Wings made from paper are put on the deceased child and it is placed on an altar adorned with flowers. In the villages there are women who specialise in these ceremonies.

As well as documenting the tradition in the academic journal, Parra collected the lyrics to songs that were associated with the practice; wrote her own funerary songs and created a whole series of paintings which depicted funerary scenes. Parra's paintings of the angel's wake tradition: *La muerte*

<sup>21</sup> Parra, Violeta. 1965 *Poesie populaire des andes* (Paris: François Maspero), pp. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Parra, Violeta. 1958-1959. "Velorios del angelitos". *Pomaire*, December, pp. 1.

*del angelito* (n.d.), *Entierro en la calle* (1964) and *Velorio del angelito* (1964), reiterate the description that she gives in the journal extract above.

In the above extract from her article for *Pomaire*, Parra emphasises the notion of purity associated with the tradition. This purity of implements and clothes has a vital symbolic function: it emphasises the core belief that the deceased child will have a pure soul and will therefore ascend directly to heaven. This belief stems from the Catholic belief in the heaven and hell realms and particularly in the dread held by Catholics about the infernal fate that befalls impure souls. By considering the infants to have pure souls, the tradition allowed relatives to add a positive dimension to their grief. Clearly then, Parra's paintings of this tradition are based on religious concepts.

In 1954, in an interview with Marina de Navasal for the periodical *Ecrán*, Parra described the *velorio del angelito* as 'una tradición trágica y sentimental, absolutamente seria y auténtica, que se mantiene como un ritual'<sup>23</sup> [a tragic and sentimental tradition, that is deeply serious and authentic, and which is perpetuated in the form of a ritual]. Music had a prominent position in the performative aspects of the tradition. Songs marked the different stages of the funerary ritual and musicians played a vital role in co-ordinating the ceremony.

*Suele haber ruedas de seis y ocho cantores, que interpretan décimas "a lo divino", sentados alrededor del "angelito" (el pequeño cadáver), vestido y con alas a la espalda, como si estuviera vivo. La madre no debe llorar, pues si lo hace su hijito muerto no irá al cielo.*<sup>24</sup>

[Performing decimalic poetry in the style known as "Of the Divine" are usually circles of six to eight singers sitting round the "angel" (the small corpse of the deceased) which is dressed as if it is alive and has wings attached to its back. The mother should not cry, as if she does so, the deceased child will not ascend to heaven.]

Parra published the transcription of two of songs from the *velorio del angelito* tradition along with the description in *Pomaire* (1958-1959). She participated in these wake rituals playing the music that was customary at them. Indeed, she staged a reproduction of an angel's wake for her radio programme.<sup>25</sup> She also wrote songs about this tradition and dedicated one of them, 'Verso por la niña muerta', to her own deceased child, Rosita Clara.<sup>26</sup> In the song *Rin del angelito*<sup>27</sup> [the Angel's Rin], Parra outlines some of the beliefs behind this unusual wake ritual:

<sup>23</sup> Parra, Violeta 1954. "Conozca a Violeta Parra, por Marina de Navasal". *Ecran* 1220 (8:6): 18-20, pp. 20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Verba, Erica. 2007. "Radio Chilena and the Battle in Defence of the Authentic during the 1950s in Chile". *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* (26: 151-166), pp. 156.

<sup>26</sup> Parra, Violeta. 2005. *Cancionero Violeta Parra* (Santiago: Impresos Socías Ltda), pp. 190.

<sup>27</sup> A Rin is a dance performed in the island of Chiloé in the south of Chile. *Ibid.*, pp. 193.



*Ya se va para los cielos  
Ese querido angelito  
A rogar por sus abuelos  
Por sus padres y hermanitos.*<sup>28</sup>

[And now it ascends to heaven  
the beloved little angel  
to pray for it's grandparents,  
for its parents and it's siblings]

The above extract refers to the belief that the deceased child is able to assist its parents and siblings to enter heaven by representing them in a celestial court. Essentially, the paintings provide a visual description of the main elements of the custom and the belief system behind it. The following is an extract from Parra's research. The interviewee was a woman who organised angel's wakes. Women who held this role were known as *arregladoras de angelitos* [organisers of angels]. In this case, the interviewee is Doña Rosa Lorca, who was also one of Parra's close friends:

No ve que yo soy arregla'ora de ángeles, y naide me la gana. Yo no los dejo senta'os en sillas como en otras partes. En dos tablillitas arreglo el angelito, lo dejo para'ito, después le pongo alitas de papel "plantea'o" y arreglo el altar como si fuera un verdadero cielo. Ahora pa'hacer el albita... "no es por echarme viento", pero se el género es de doble ancho, no hay pa'que hacéle costura, cuando yo lo corto.<sup>29</sup>

[Don't you see that I am an angel's arranger and no-one does it better than me. I don't leave them sitting on seats as they do in other places. I arrange the little angel lying down a little on two small boards, then I put little "sticky-up" wings on it and I arrange the altar as if it were really heaven. Now for the soul, it is "not to blow hot air" but the cloth is double width and there is no reason to sew it when I cut it.]

An altar similar to the one that Rosa Lorca describes figures in the paintings *Velorio del angelito* [The Angel's Wake] and *La muerte del angelito* [The Death of the Little Angel]. In the former, the corpse or *angelito* [little angel] has prime importance in the centre of the composition in a seated position upon a table. In the latter, the corpse, now on a small chair on a table top, is displaced to the lower part of the frame, while the child's blue face recurs in the top frame with wings instead of a body, symbolic of the spiritual journey it is believed to be embarking upon. In *La muerte del angelito* the body of the deceased is surrounded by offerings: candles, flowers and a hen, the

<sup>28</sup> *Ibíd.*, pp. 119.

<sup>29</sup> Parra, Violeta. 1979. *Cantos folklóricos chilenos* (Santiago: Editorial Nascimento), pp. 37.



traditional burial gift for men in Chile.<sup>30</sup> In the bottom right of *Velorio del angelito* composition, are two dogs. One is black, and the other is golden. In Chile the dog is often considered the 'guardián de las puertas del "más allá"' [the guardian to the doors to the other world]<sup>31</sup> and in the Aymara tradition in particular, black dogs are associated with death.

Así por ejemplo, entre los aymaras el perro negro (*ch'iar anu*) está relacionado con la muerte. Este pueblo piensa que el alma de los difuntos será acompañada por un perro negro al cruzar un lago.<sup>32</sup>

[So for example, among the Aymara people, the black dog (*ch'iar anu*) is associated with death. This culture believes that the soul of the deceased will be accompanied by a black dog as it crosses a lake.]

The dog recurs in another painting of the angel's wake tradition, *Entierro en la calle* [Burial in the Street]. In this painting, we find a funerary procession led by a woman wearing a black cape. Behind her, a man is carrying the corpse of a child. The corpse is once again depicted in white. The woman and the child, with grey faces like the mourning musician in *Velorio del angelito*, are carrying flowers. The most intriguing part of *Entierro en la calle* is what appears at first to be an angel with light blue wings, but what, on closer inspection is a small child within the shape of petals. This links with the traditional belief that the soul of a deceased child will ascend to heaven in a flower:

Cuando se muera la carne el alma busca su sitio  
Adentro de una amapola  
O dentro de un pajarito.<sup>33</sup>

[When the flesh dies, the soul searches for a place  
Inside a poppy  
or inside a bird]

Images such as these serve a number of functions. Firstly, they record a tradition that was disappearing. They also recognise the tradition, validate it and give it greater visibility among the public. Ritual practices are particularly important in agricultural societies, as Marta Turok explains with reference to *campesina* culture: 'El ámbito de lo simbólico, de las fiestas, los ritos y la religiosidad dan marco a la suntuosidad, a la transformación de lo cotidiano en lujo.'<sup>34</sup> [The symbolic realm, the realm of galas, rituals and religiosity emphasise sumptuousness and transform everyday things into

<sup>30</sup> Penelope Dransart advised me that the hen is a traditional burial gift.

<sup>31</sup> Montecino Aguirre, Sonia. 2003. *Mitos de Chile: diccionario de seres, magias y encantos* (Santiago: Editorial Sudamericana), pp. 354.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 354.

<sup>33</sup> Parra, Violeta. 2005. *Cancionero Violeta Parra* (Santiago: Impresos Socías Ltda), pp. 119.

<sup>34</sup> Turok, Marta. 1988. *Cómo acercarse a la artesanía* (México: Editorial Plaza y Valdéz), pp. 39.

luxury]. By representing this important part of *campesino* culture, Parra celebrates and acknowledges aspects of traditional culture which tend to be overlooked by mainstream culture. As a result she strengthens the cultures that she represents and forms a bond with the people who would participate in such rituals.

Representations 'construct our reality, facilitate communication and social interaction, demarcate and consolidate groups, aid the formation of social identity, serve in the process of socialization and, finally, make the unfamiliar familiar'<sup>35</sup> Representations perform these social functions by the process of anchoring, in which we use classification and naming to give a new object meaning and objectification in which we make the unfamiliar familiar by objectifying it.<sup>36</sup> Parra's paintings of the *velorio del angelito* enact this process of anchoring by classifying and validating this part of their world (the angel's wake tradition). At the same time, they objectify it because these paintings are representations of the tradition and not actually part of it. Nonetheless, these paintings can, I believe, be considered folkloric in a number of ways. They are anthropological; perform a cultural function by displaying cultural practices for non-members of the culture being performed; develop the practice into another completely different art form, the oil painting, and vindicate the ritual by giving it increased visibility.

Although paintings formed part of the angel's wake ritual in some geographic areas (this was the case in Mexico for example),<sup>37</sup> I have seen no evidence that they figured in the Chilean custom. Thus, Parra's painting of the practice did not form part of the rituals and therefore constitutes a secondary level of representation. Both the participation in the ritual and the representation of the ritual serve a validating purpose.

Theatre and theatrical social spectacles and ceremonies clearly have much in common: people play roles, set scenarios in motion, wear costumes, construct sets, and so forth [...] Just as theatre controls the audience's perception and directs its attention through the conscious use of movement, timing, light, sound, space, and so on, the theatricality of social events also directs and controls the attention of its population.<sup>38</sup>

Ironically, the very fact that the *velorio del angelito* is a ritual, excludes it from the realm of art.

Ciertos montajes hechos en ocasiones de fiestas religiosas también exponen con claridad su vocación híbrida, que las

<sup>35</sup> Bradbury, Mary. 1999. *Representations of Death: A Social Psychological Perspective* (London: Routledge), pp. 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Talía Morris describes original angel's wake paintings in her analysis of representation of the angel's wake by the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Talía Morris, unpublished paper.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, Diana. 1991. "Theatre Review: The Representation of Otherness in Chicano and Latin American Theatre and Film". *Theatre Journal*, pp. 3.



hace oscilar entre la religión y la fiesta civil, entre la forma sensible y la función social; [...] Irónicamente, si estas manifestaciones carecieran de sus propios significados rituales y tuvieran una mera intención estética, podrían ser cómodamente clasificadas bajo diversas categorías eruditas del arte actual (*happening, performance, body arte* ambientaciones *environment e*, incluso, *eat art*).<sup>39</sup>

[Certain settings made at religious festivals also demonstrate with clarity their hybrid nature, which causes them to oscillate between the religious and the everyday gala, between their aesthetic and social function; [...] Ironically, if these manifestations belonged to their own ritual signifiers and had a mere aesthetic intention, they could easily be classified under erudite categories of contemporary art (*happening, performance, body art, environmental installations and even eat art*).]

And thus while Parra's paintings of the angel's wake are profoundly serious, I also consider them to highlight this ironic relationship between conventional art and folk culture. Parra's paintings of the *velorio del angelito* are signifiers, which point to the folkloric ritual (the signified) but crucially they are not the ritual itself. And as art works they tend to be valued in ways that the ritual itself is not. This disjunct between signifier and signified adds another layer of meaning to Parra's work. I read their further meaning as the relationship between the art work and the art practice of the angel's wake. The signifier points to what the signified *is* (i.e. an artistic occurrence) however under the current conception of art, these wake rituals would not be considered art, since 'genuine' rituals as opposed to staged rituals are excluded. For a performance to be a work of art it must contain an essential ingredient: mimesis.

Parra's representation of the ritual posits an essential question about what art actually is, a question that was highly topical in the 1960s. Art is traditionally defined as 'a poem, a painting, a piece of music, a novel'.<sup>40</sup> This definition excludes the rituals in which such creations are often manifested. This takes us to the constraint that to be art, something must be mimetic:

It was not until the notion of "fine art" was developed in the eighteenth century that philosophers attempted to describe imitation or representation as an essential or necessary feature of art, and made the first moves towards a definition.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Escobar, Ticio. 2008. *El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo* (Santiago: Ediciones Metales Pesados), pp. 60-61.

<sup>40</sup> Wollheim, Richard. 1980. *Art and its Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Hudson Hick, Darren. 2012. *Introducing Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. London: Continuum, pp. 21.



From this relatively modern perspective, Parra's paintings of wake rituals would count as art. Should performance art be included in the definition, then Parra's reproduction of the ritual would also be considered art, but as Angel Parra explains, there was an uneasiness in the acceptance of this staged funeral: 'cuando aparecimos en la radio, todos se quedaron callados, un poco asombrados de lo que estaban viendo'.<sup>42</sup> While the ritual itself would not be considered as art even though it would have all the hallmarks of a happening or performance, Parra's staged copy would be considered art and her painting of the ritual is undeniably 'art' in the traditional sense since it is an oil painting based on mimesis.

To conclude then, Parra's employment of religion in her art, like her work in general, is multi-faceted. On the one hand some of her song-lyrics contain a strong criticism of christianity. However on the other hand, there are songs which are deeply reverent and profoundly religious. Some of the songs with more critical lyrics, suggest for example, that the promise of redemption is a way of discouraging the poor in society from questioning thier position and from discouraging them activism which would better their lives. God, Parra writes, does not want revolutions. Such bold messages are less evident in Parra's visual art, where she employs many archetypes from christian art history. Within these archetypes, images such as the Final Judgement, are presented with great pessimism, and thus I argue that the criticism of her song lyrics underlies the narratives of many of the paintings.

Parra also created art works so surreal that they could be seen as sa-creligious. Parra's embroidery *Cristo en bikini*, without a doubt one of her masterpieces, is based on a humour which could be seen to denegrate the traditional crucifixion scene. The bathos of a holy image dressed in a bikini is typical of the wry humour that characterises Parra's activist voice.

Yet Parra also created another body of religious work. Work which was deeply reverent. This facet of her work is most evident in the songs, poems and paintings she created of funerary scenes. Parra was particularly interested in the Angel's Wake tradition and her songs and oil paintings of the tradition are profoundly serious. Nonetheless, these works can also seen to have a philosophical angle since they are based on rituals, traditional practices that would generally be considered as outwith the artistic canon. By presenting rituals (practices that are not considered as art) and fables from oral history, Parra destabilises implicit hegemonies in the field of cultural production and specifically the architectonics of modern or classical art.

While embroideries like *Cristo en bikini* and paintings like *the last supper* are eminently surreal, Parra's representations of the tradition of the angel's wake, demonstrates that she viewed some religious rituals as deeply serious. The common denominator in all of Parra's religious works is popular culture. Her use of religious tropes offers a pliable view of religion, which places

<sup>42</sup> Subercaseaux, Bernardo and Londoño, Jaime. 1982. *Gracias a la vida: Violeta Parra, Testimonio* (Santiago: Editora Graniza/Ceneca), pp. 75.

value not so much on the religious practices or narratives, but on the Chilean popular and folk cultures that she has drawn them from.

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